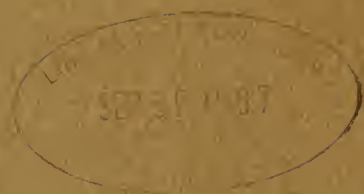


Anne Traubel
July 25. 1921

SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM



House, Grace Bigelow.

SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM

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To

MR. AND MRS. GEORGE FOSTER PEABODY

In warm appreciation of your lifelong devotion to the cause of peace and good-will among nations and races, and your loyal support of the Great Peacemaker, Woodrow Wilson.

GRACE BIGELOW HOUSE.

SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM

“They carried the great ideals of a free people at their hearts and with that vision were unconquerable.”

WOODROW WILSON.

SOLDIERS OF FREEDOM

“COME ON, son, you’d better make your shoe-sole hot or you guine get left,” called out the ferryman to a big, loose-jointed young Negro who was making his way down the long wooden wharf in a leisurely fashion. Before the boy reached the steps where the big, flat-bottomed row-boat lay waiting, the boat-man pushed off with a laugh.

“Since you’s got so much time, man, you might as well wait for de next boat!”

The boy said nothing, but looked down at the receding boat in mute protest.

“You’d better go back for him, Ben,” said one of the passengers. “He is one of the men to go in the next call, and pretty soon he’ll be fighting your battles for you. You wouldn’t feel good to play him a mean trick now!”

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The man who protested was a well-groomed, alert young Negro with a pleasant but authoritative voice which bespoke the teacher.

"Oh, well," said Ben good-naturedly, "if he's guine to fight dem Boches, I reckon I best take him along."

The late-comer, aside from a grateful look, gave no thanks as he took his seat in the crowded boat beside his champion, who moved to give him room. His dull, listless face and stooping shoulders presented a striking contrast to the keen-eyed, erect young man beside him.

"But," remarked the irrepressible Ben, "I ain't see what use Uncle Sam have fer a good-for-nothing nigger like you! Why, man alive, dem Boches guine kill you dead too many times 'fore you find out it's time to run!"

There was a general laugh. Ben's chaffing usually made the trip to and from the Island a merry one for his passengers.

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When the laughter had subsided, the prospective soldier raised his head, and looking thoughtfully across to the ferryman, said in his slow, drawling voice, "How, Ben? I ain't know Uncle Sam been lookin' for soldiers what could run away from de enemy. It seems like he druther have de boys what kin make de Germans run."

There was a chorus of delighted approval. "Now, son, you's talking straight! Tell it, Dave! You's in de stream! Talk it, man!"

There were a number of drafted men in the boat who, like David Jenkins, had just been over for the physical examination. A rather excited comparison of notes commenced, but young David sat silent, a drooping, dejected figure in the midst of that jovial crowd.

No team was waiting for him when they reached the other side, so he started out immediately on his seven-mile walk home. He had not gone far on the heavy, sandy

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road when a cheery voice called out, "Can I give you a lift?" The teacher pulled up his horses and the boy climbed in, but he had very little to say to the pleasant casual remarks of his companion, who was himself rather deeply absorbed in thoughts of his own.

It was just before they reached the Corner Store, where he was to get out, that David suddenly turned to the man beside him. "Can you tell me what all dis here fightin' business is about? I ain't got no quarrel wid dem Germans. Why must I go ter kill dem? Dey ain't done me no hurt, an' I ain't want to meddle dem. What has we poor colored folks down here got to do wid dis war? An' I tell you de truth, suh, I ain't see who guine wuk my farm when I done gone! My mother kinder feeble, and she ain't got but me one to 'pend upon."

The teacher, who was going to camp himself in a few days, turned from his own problems and looked with keen inter-

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est and sympathy at the dazed boy beside him. He explained patiently and clearly the provisions of the Government for the care of dependent families, and those causes of the war which might make some appeal to this bewildered mind, whose mental vision had never reached beyond the limited boundaries of his island home.

"There is to be a meeting at the Blue Mountain Lodge next week for all the men who are leaving at the next call. Be sure and come out. You'll hear then all about what we are fighting for," he said at parting.

The meeting was held the night before the drafted men were to leave. The dimly lighted society hall was gayly decorated with flags, and special seats of honor were placed for the soldiers. There was an atmosphere of tense, suppressed emotion among the people, both white and colored, who had gathered at the hall to do honor to these first boys who were to leave the Island the next day for camp.

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The boys themselves were quiet and awed in the face of these new experiences that were coming so soon. There were about twenty of them, some in "Sunday best" and others, like David Jenkins, who had come in overalls, fresh from work in the fields.

They sat in their seats of honor in serious silence, and listened passively at first, but with growing interest, to the songs and speeches of those who had gathered there to wish them "God speed" as they entered on their great crusade.

There was no light in the face of David Jenkins until his friend, the young teacher, arose to respond on behalf of the drafted men.

"Friends, we have been found worthy to serve our country and our flag in a great cause. We are Soldiers of Freedom! We are to work and fight, not only to protect our country, but to help bring freedom and justice to many suffering people in Europe who have been crushed

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under the heel of the oppressor, who have been made slaves under a military system which we know nothing about.

“Our President has called us to go overseas to help put an end forever to war, so that never again man will be called upon to lift his hand against his fellow-man! We must crush the Prussian military power and make straight the path of peace for all the nations of the earth, both weak and strong.

“We Negro soldiers are proud to have a share in this great work. We are proud to be called upon to defend the honor of our flag and country, and to help the weaker nations of the world secure their freedom. To no people on earth does the word Freedom mean so much as it does to us, to whom it is still a new and sacred treasure. Our fathers remember the day when freedom was more to be desired than life itself. The longing for freedom is in our blood—our inheritance! We shall know how to fight in order to pass on to

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others this great boon which was given to us at the cost of so much bloodshed and suffering in this great country of ours.

“We go to do our share, without hatred in our hearts for our enemy, but with that which is more compelling than hate—a great love in our hearts for our country, and a deep-rooted, living hope that when we have proved ourselves men, worthy to work and fight and die for our country, a grateful nation may gladly give us the recognition of real men, and the rights and privileges of true and loyal citizens of these United States.”

There was deep feeling and fervor in the speaker's voice which thrilled his audience. They listened spell-bound to the end. As he sat down, a clear tenor voice rang out,—

*“March on Freedom,
March on conquering truth,
Liberty is calling.”

* Words by Natalie Curtis Burlin to the air of “Ride on, Jesus”.—*St. Helena Island Spiritual*.

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The refrain was caught up by others, and verse after verse of that Hymn of Freedom, which was sung by the Negro troops in all the camps in this country, and over in France, were sung for the first time in the little society hall on St. Helena Island. The tune was familiar to all—a favorite, stirring “Spiritual” of the Island, “Ride on, Jesuś,” but the words were new and seemed to carry new meaning to their familiar melody. It brought light into the eyes and courage to the hearts of the sorely troubled people.

So it was that David Jenkins went out on his great adventure, with the Hymn of Freedom ringing in his ears, and the words of the teacher written indelibly on his mind and heart. He was a Soldier of Freedom! That was a matter for pride and thought.

His painfully labored letters from camp to his mother told very little of what was happening to him.

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"I does my best to make a good soldier. You must pray for me that I have a good success. I is a Soldier of Freedom. Give my love to Handful and say 'huddy' to Manchie for me, and tell him he must keep that cotton clean till I come back. Your son, David."

Once, just before he went overseas, he was given leave to go home. His mother did not recognize him at once. Tall, straight and supple, with a light in his eyes that told of an awakened mental life, he was indeed a new man. He wore his uniform with pride and distinction—a pride that was not egotistical or offensive, because it was pride for the cause he represented. He was a son of Uncle Sam, a Soldier of Freedom! That idea had rooted itself deeply in all his thoughts.

Through all the strain of those terrible days at the Front, in front line trenches or when going "over the top", he clung to the thought of his high mission. He was

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a Soldier of Freedom! He could never fail! He was ready to suffer, and if need be to die, for something that would help the whole human race, that would put an end forever to all such agonies.

He was seriously wounded in the Argonne fighting, where he lost his leg. But there was never a word of complaint from him in those days and months of constant suffering in the hospital. He never once lost the serene courage of an undaunted spirit. He won the love and respect of those about him by his gentle patience in suffering and grateful appreciation of every little service and effort to ease his pain. He was always eager to lighten the burden of the over-worked nurses and doctors and to beguile the weary hours for his fellow sufferers by some cheery word or quaintly phrased humor. Often he would sing to some homesick boy the Spirituals of his Island and people, and sometimes he sang the Hymn of Freedom,—

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To Jew and Christian, Freedom,
To white and black man, Freedom,
Democracy cannot turn back,
Liberty is calling.

To each religion, Freedom,
To every race, Freedom,
March with the dawn-light in our face,
Liberty is calling.

Then march on, Freedom,
March on, conquering hosts,
Victory is calling.

“You know, we is all Soldiers of Freedom,” he would announce to his comrades, “and it sure makes me proud to know that we made a good fight and whipped them war-makers! Now our President is goin’ to fix it up so that folks ain’t goin’ to fight no more. No more of our boys is goin’ to be cut up like we is. He’s startin’ up a society where folks can talk their troubles out, and settle their ’sputes like Christians ’stead of like de sinner and de drunkard wid de gun. That seem to me like good

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sense. 'Then all de world is goin' to be friends and brothers.'

"Come now, Dave, you ain't think we guine be friends wid dem Germans, does you?" called out one of the men incredulously.

"Sure, man," came the quick response, "we ain't got no quarrel wid de Germans now we done lick dem! Seems like we sooner have all folks our friends than our enemy, and I'm thinkin' we can find all the friends in the world if we find that friendship in ourself."

This was after the Armistice, and when the Peace Conference was well under way. But presently rumors began to get about that all was not going well at the Conference, that forces of reaction and imperialism were pressing hard against forward-looking idealism. Fears, suspicions, selfish greed and narrow nationalism were finding expression among the people of shell-shocked Europe, and bringing to bear pressure in the Councils of the peace-mak-

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ers against the broader, saner views of the American President and his delegation. There was talk that he would withdraw, and these rumors reached even the hospital where David Jenkins, a casualty of the great war, lay dying.

One day, early in April, he overheard a conversation between one of the doctors and some visitors, which left him brooding and thoughtful.

"Well, doctor, I understand that the President is disgusted with the whole imperialistic, land-grabbing crowd here at Paris and has cabled for the George Washington to take him home."

"Yes, I don't blame him, but that means the end of the League of Nations, I fear, and without that this Conference will be simply sowing seeds for future wars. I must say, I hate to quit the job before we are through with it! It doesn't seem fair to the boys who have died over here, and to these who have given so much," said

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the doctor sadly, with an expressive gesture toward the rows of hospital beds.

The next day David Jenkins asked for paper and pencil. He refused courteously but firmly the proffered aid of the nurse. "No, muh, I must fer write dis myself." Painfully and laboriously he bent over his letter, taking short rests occasionally and pausing to wipe his moist forehead with the sleeve of his right arm.

"MR. PRESIDENT WOODROW WILSON, DEAR SIR: I hope this finds you well as it leaves me. I am feeling fine, excusing my leg which I done left at the argon and there's a hole in my shoulder which keeps me kinder wakeful. But I'se thankful my life is spared to see this day, and I pray God I may be a good soldier of Christ. I sure done my best to be a good soldier for Uncle Sam.

I hear you is gotten discouraged about that society you is tryin' to get a-goin' to stop all this war foolish-

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ness. Don't you worry, Mr. President, dear sir, you jes keep on an' we boys goin' to stand right back of you. Don't you pay no 'tention to them landgrabbers over here an' them folks back home jest wasten they breath a-talkin'. They ain't never been at the front, and they don't sense what war really is. If they'd a-been in the fight, you bet they'd quit their foolishness and be ready to try any kind of society what will keep folks from settlin' their 'sputes by killin' each other. I sure ain't like it. I ain't makin' no kick 'count of losin' my leg and such like, in dis fight to end war. I done what I could for my flag and country. We colored boys is proud we been do our share to help bring freedom to all these folks over here. But there's a-plenty of our boys lyin' dead back there at de front, an' we boys ain't satisfy to leave dem here widout finishin' up the job we set

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out to do. You must do your best for us, Mr. President, with all these quitters. You must fer try and make de folks at home understand, jest make dem see things like we done see it out here. I can write no more, but on de knees of my heart I pray for you.

Yours friendly,

DAVID JENKINS."

The soldier finished the letter with a sigh and fell back exhausted. "Please, muh," he said faintly to the nurse who hastened to his side, "Will you fer send dis letter to the President and ask him to send my answer back soon. I might not be able to wait too long."

His letter was written just before the President was to attend that memorable meeting of the League of Nations Commission, on April 10th, where he made another great struggle to secure the American amendments to that Covenant which

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was to be the pledge and promise of a new era of peace and justice and freedom for the nations of the world. The session of the Commission that day lasted until midnight. It was late when the President arose to make his final appeal. A record of that day's events states that (*) "Those who heard him said it was the most dramatic moment in the Conference, and that the fire of the President's speech surpassed anything he had shown in open debates."

Those who knew the great-hearted President best, realized that underneath the clear logic and force of his argument and his persuasive eloquence there lay a passionate determination to justify the bereaved mothers and wives at home in their great sacrifice, and to keep faith with the dead, those Soldiers of Freedom, black or white, who had forever made sacred the soil of France to all Americans. That

(*) Page 296 Peace Conference, Day by Day, by C. T. Thompson.

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they should have made the supreme sacrifice in vain was unthinkable to their Commander-in-Chief!

That very night of victory and achievement, David died. He could not wait for his "answer back." The slender thread of life had broken in that last great effort of his to help assure the lasting peace for which he had fought.

"I shall always feel differently about all the Negro race, for having known this man," said the nurse with tears in her eyes. "I have always lived among colored people in the South, but nowadays we don't learn to know and love them the way our fathers and mothers did in the old times. I never realized before that they could be anything but a problem and responsibility.

"Perhaps," she added slowly, "the President is right, after all, in saying that we are not fighting German imperialism merely, but that we are one of the champions of the rights of mankind and that

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we shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and freedom of the nation can make them. If that is true," she continued with a sigh, "our fight is not won, but only just begun! I wonder if we shall do our share in the big fight coming, as faithfully and loyally as this simple Soldier of Freedom!"

Another white cross was added to those endless rows of white crosses on the battlegrounds of France; another life was laid down—a sacrifice on the altar of the world's freedom—or was it to be only another victim of the world's selfishness and greed? The cotton fields of his peaceful, sunny island knew David Jenkins no more, but the hope and faith that had made his life beautiful lived on in those whom he had touched, and reached out in an ever-widening circle to an unknown host.

When a few months later, that other great Soldier of Freedom, weary and spent with the struggle, turned his face

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westward, carrying with him in that dramatic hour of history the Magna Charta of the world's freedom, something of the deep sacredness of his Trust could be felt in the challenging words, "We stand at the cross-roads, however. The way is only pointed out, but those of us who have seen through the travail of war the vision of a world made safe for mankind, must consecrate our lives to its realization."

He faced the bitter struggle, for the honor and idealism of his country, with the serene courage and faith of an undaunted spirit. No sacrifice was too great to make for the great cause of freedom and world peace.

When at last he fell, another casualty of the great war, in that last gallant effort, "to make the folks at home see and understand," there came from him no word of regret or complaint. Perhaps as one who had recorded history and as a statesman who had helped to make history, he understood better than most people that

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the real struggle had only just begun—the fight to “vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world”—a world demoralized by the most terrible war in history.

Deep down underneath the bitterness and rancor of partisan politics and selfish greed and fear that found voice in the aftermath of war, there was growing a fuller consciousness of those ideals of peace and justice. They have become woven, like a golden thread, into the very fabric of our national life and thought. Whether we wish it or not, consciously or unconsciously, our thoughts and acts as a nation will be measured by the high standards that, through the compelling voice of the President, have become our country's richest heritage. For this priceless gift to humanity, in this its darkest hour, a great silent multitude here and in every far corner of the earth, “on the knees of their hearts,” are praying for this greatest soldier of Freedom.

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